

# Tabitha in the Bible

## A disciple known for doing good

👤 Robin Gallaher Branch 📅 December 23, 2021 💬 22 Comments 👁 82806 views ➦ Share

Luke, the writer of Luke-Acts, tells [the story of Tabitha](#), a disciple brought back to life after prayer from the apostle Peter. After she is washed and laid out in an upper room, Peter takes her hand and commands her to get up (Acts 9:36-42).

In seven verses, Luke presents Tabitha as much loved, and the miracle of her return to life leads many to believe (v. 42). Luke's terse account contains praise, humor, honor, sadness, joy and insights on the faith of the early church. Tabitha is so beloved and so essential to the life of her believing community in Joppa, a port city near the heart of modern Tel Aviv, that others cannot imagine life without her. Tabitha simply cannot stay dead. Her faithful community will not permit it!

Throughout Luke's story, Tabitha remains silent. Luke speaks for her. In what could be considered a humorous touch, her only living actions are opening her eyes, seeing Peter, sitting up, being helped up by him, and being presented alive to the believers and widows (vv. 40-41).



In the 15th-century painting *Healing of the Cripple and Raising of Tabitha*, Masolino da Panicale depicts the most famous scene of Tabitha in the Bible: the miraculous prayer of Peter that brings Tabitha back from the dead.

## Luke Honors Tabitha in the Bible

By silencing her, Luke honors her. Others give her accolades and loudly mourn her death (v. 39). Perhaps the best and truest praise one receives comes extemporaneously from others. This certainly applies to the treatment of Tabitha in the Bible.

Luke introduces her with a double name: Tabitha and Dorcas (v. 36). The Aramaic and Greek mean gazelle. Perhaps the doubling shows her ministry to Jewish and Hellenistic believers, something noted earlier in Acts 6:1 and emphasized from chapter 10 on; if so, the placement of Tabitha's story serves as a transition in the fulfillment of Jesus' command to his disciples to "be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8). Perhaps her name indicates a woman of energy, grace, beauty and quick movements.

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*Robin Gallaher Branch has written several other Bible History Daily-exclusive character studies. Read [Judith: A Remarkable Heroine](#), [Barnabas: An Encouraging Early Church Leader](#) and [Anna in the Bible](#).*

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Luke praises her as a disciple (*mathetria*) who was always doing good and helping the poor (Acts 9:36); her specific designation as *disciple* proves that Jesus had female disciples. In fact, there are three places where the words *disciple* or *disciples* include women: Acts 9:1-2, 36; 18:24-26b.

Luke indicates that Tabitha took God's commands about society's most vulnerable seriously. ("Do not oppress the widow or the fatherless, the alien or the poor." Zechariah 7:10. See also Deuteronomy 24:17, 20-21; Ezekiel 22:7; James 1:27.) Looking after the marginalized is one of God's characteristics, too, for God is shown in Psalm 146:8-9 as lifting up those bowed down, watching over the alien and sustaining the fatherless and widow.

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Luke is generally quite selective with his praise, heightening the value of the accolades given to Tabitha in the Bible. In addition to Tabitha, Luke-Acts commends a few other notable characters. Consider these examples: Luke describes Zechariah and Elizabeth as upright in the sight of God (Luke 1:6), Joseph as a good and upright man from Arimathea (Luke 23:50-51) and Barnabas as a good man and full of the Holy Spirit and faith (Acts 11:24).

Acts 9 highlights Luke's characteristic writing style with its balance of opposites. Luke pairs Tabitha's story of dying and being brought back to life with that of Aeneas, who is healed by Peter after being bedridden for eight years (vv. 32-35). Neither Tabitha nor Aeneas seeks a miracle. While visiting Lydda, Peter sees Aeneas and says, "Aeneas, Jesus Christ heals you" (v. 34); concerning Tabitha's death, the disciples of Joppa urge Peter to "please come at once!" (v. 38). Acts 9:1-31 tells of Saul's conversion and verses 32-43 close and balance the chapter with stories about Peter; like Peter, Saul becomes a great apostle of the faith. Seen another way, Acts 9 contains a man's miraculous conversion and a woman's miraculous restoration to life.

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## Ministry Focus

Luke's account of Tabitha focuses on her ministry (to use a modern term) to two groups: the poor and widows. In Biblical times, the designation *widow* meant a woman whose husband was dead and who had no means of financial support; therefore, she needed both protection and physical, legal and financial assistance.\* In other words, a widow is a woman with constant needs, and being a widow was virtually synonymous with being poor. If enfeebled, who will glean for the widows and how will they eat? If they lose their houses in order to pay their debts, where will they live? (In Mark 12:40, Jesus condemns teachers of the law specifically for devouring widows' houses.) If they lack shelter and regular sustenance, they likely will fall ill. Who then will care for them? As they age, who will listen to them?

In a parable about helping the needy, Jesus contrasts the life-saving actions of a Samaritan with the bypassing indifference of a priest and Levite (Luke 10:25-37). Unlike these members of the established priesthood who ignored the man beaten by bandits, Tabitha purposefully sought out the poor and widows and actively looked to see how she could help meet their needs. In the first century, when female activities generally centered on daily survival for themselves and their families, Tabitha engaged the needs of her community. Her lifestyle showed that love is an active verb intent on doing good for others.

Luke concentrates on one specific part of Tabitha's ministry: making robes and clothing for the widows. Evidently she dressed these widows fashionably, for as she lies washed and prepared for burial, they tearfully display her work to Peter with obvious pride (v. 39). These women were her friends.

Tabitha's lifestyle contrasts admirably with the characterization of the good wife from Proverbs 31:10-31. Both display phenomenal energy. Both extend help willingly to the poor (Acts 9:36; Prov. 31:20). Both are proficient in needlework (Acts 9:39; Prov. 31:13, 19, 21-22, 24, 25). Both seek to do good and undertake their activities within the context of faith (Acts 9:36; Prov. 31:12, 30). The lives of both women show they were "doers," each putting feet to her faith.

Luke's succinct description and the outpouring of grief at her death showed how greatly the believing community and widows loved Tabitha (v. 39)—a strong indication that Tabitha herself thoroughly enjoyed her work and loved these people in return.

## Silences

As always when reading the Biblical text, consider its silences. What does Luke leave out? Tabitha may have been a widow herself, for Luke omits any mention of her husband or family. Additionally,

presumably her home and has an upper room (Acts 9:39). Evidently she offered her hospitality with flair, for the disciples and widows congregate around her. Perhaps Tabitha chose to use her wealth to aid the poor and the widows (v. 36).

Luke's description of Tabitha makes it easy to imagine her home as welcoming, open and full of people. Luke indicates that Tabitha's home functioned as a community center for believers. Tabitha may well have presided over a house church in her home. Quite likely her home became a drop off point for donations as she served as a reliable conduit for goods and services for believers and the wider Joppa citizenry. Tabitha is one of many New Testament women who, once converted to the new faith, set about building a community.

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## Joppa's Believing Community

In contrast to the long illness of Aeneas (v. 33), Luke presents Tabitha's sickness and death as sudden (v. 37). Luke then shifts the narrative from Tabitha to Joppa's believing community, which mirrors Tabitha's lifestyle of action. It too puts feet to its faith.

Upon hearing of Tabitha's death and Peter's sojourn in Lydda (v. 32), members of the Joppa community immediately send two men to fetch him, hoping for a miracle.

Since Lydda was 25 miles northwest of Jerusalem and a day's journey by foot from Joppa, it is possible that Tabitha was dead a total three days before her resuscitation. The messengers say, "Please come at once," (*me okneses*); the use of the subjunctive indicates a formal request and carries a sense of respect. Peter drops everything and accompanies the messengers back to Joppa (vv. 38-39). He finds the widows grieving loudly in the upper room with the body (v. 39). Not only do the widows mourn Tabitha's loss; they have valid concerns for their own lives, now that their protector is dead.

The widows' mourning reciprocates the love Tabitha extended to them. Arguably she met more than their clothing needs. Her hospitality and generosity probably gave them food, sanctuary, a home, a warm heart and a listening ear. Modern research shows that talking not only is crucial to health but adds to longevity. Tabitha's outreaching kindness undoubtedly saved lives.

## The Miracle of Tabitha in the Bible

Luke records the miracle simply. It seems to happen quickly. Peter clears the upper room, perhaps because he's distracted by the widows' noisy grief (v. 40)! Alone with the dead body, he gets down on his knees, prays, and turns to the dead woman. Speaking to her he says, "Tabitha, get up" (v. 40). And she does!

Peter calls in the believers and widows and gives her back to them, alive. One can imagine the plethora of emotions—joy, wonder, amazement, awe, thanksgiving and even doubt—as everybody crowds in the upper room to confirm for themselves that Tabitha really is healed and alive!

Luke concludes Tabitha's story with more silences, muzzling both Tabitha and Peter. Peter says nothing about the miracle and Tabitha says nothing about what it's like being dead. Instead, Luke sums up the reactions of all concerned by stating a fact—her return to life became known all over Joppa—and its result—that many people believed in the Lord because of it (v. 42).

Luke then carries on with Peter's visit to the centurion Cornelius' home in Caesarea (Acts 10) but remains silent about Tabitha's life. However, Luke's silence again compliments her, for it acknowledges the obvious. We already know her character. We know what happens. This remarkable woman simply carries on doing good for the poor and serving her friends, the widows, by making them stylish robes.



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## Notes:

\* In the Bible, widowhood often serves as a textual marker to alert savvy readers of moments of significance. For more, read Robin Gallaher Branch, "[Biblical Views: Groveling Grannies or Teaching Tools](#)" as it appeared in the January/February 2013 issue of *Biblical Archaeology Review*.

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